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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

20 November 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Big Minh and Senator Don: Old Political Players Begin Auditions for a New Play*

This memorandum examines the position and prospects of General Duong Van Minh and Senator Tran Van Don in the Vietnamese situation. It concludes that they are unlikely to become much more than a nuisance to the Thieu government in the near future. Even if they gained further political strength in South Vietnam and the US weakened in its support of Thieu, they would still face substantial resistance from the military in any attempt to assume power.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Hoping to cash in on the changing situation in South Vietnam, aspiring political leaders have begun to maneuver. Potentially the most important moves have been General Duong Van (Big) Minh's hesitant appearance in the political wings and Senator (also General) Tran Van Don's shift to stage center in

* This memorandum has been coordinated with representatives of OCI and SAVA.

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opposing the government of President (also General) Nguyen Van Thieu. Although the theater and setting for these developments are in Saigon, Minh and Don are attempting to appeal to Washington and Hanoi as well as to the South Vietnamese people. The following paragraphs assess the roles of Minh and Don, the circumstances under which they conceivably could become political stars instead of merely being hopeful understudies, and the possible consequences of such developments.

II. THE PLAYERS

2. Prologue. At some point in the drama it was probably inevitable that some politicians would seek power through compromise with the Communists. There is precedent for such action: in 1963, Ngo Dinh Nhu, the eminence grise of the Diem regime, apparently saw the possibility of a deal with the Communists as a way to cope with mounting domestic opposition and US disenchantment. Since then, the militant An Quang Buddhists led by Thich Tri Quang have flirted off and on with the idea; in the 1967 presidential election the unknown and unsavory Troung Dinh Dzu made a name for himself on the issue; and, during 1969, Tran Ngoc Lieng's small and feckless "National Progressive Force"

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gained a few headlines with its call for a "government of reconciliation." But it has only been in the last few months that politicians of past prominence have moved toward a soft line approach.

3. Tran Van Don. Senator Don provides the clearest example of the new opposition. Don has progressively soured on the Thieu government as it proved unwilling to pay his price for support. He began to move his National Salvation Front openly into opposition last spring when he apparently decided that the US was modifying its support of the Thieu regime. This fed his ambitious hope that the premier's job was within his reach. When nothing happened, Don lapsed into momentary silence. But following his recent trip to the US, where he appears to have drunk deeply the draughts of domestic American opposition to the war, Don returned to Saigon with renewed hope that the US might soon make some move that would provide him an opening.

4. Since his return, Don has stepped up his attacks against the Thieu government and has put forth some rather vague proposals for the salvation of South Vietnam. He has called for a "middle way" approach, with the South Vietnamese beholden to no foreign

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powers. He claims that in the ensuing political contest his kind of "third force" would emerge victorious. He implies that this would bring an end to the war and a settlement with the Communists. Don's third force or middle way has been viewed by most Saigon observers as a thin guise for neutralism and has not been well received. He has, however, denied any specific advocacy of neutralism.

5. It may be that Don would like to take over the government from Thieu and Ky, calling his a "third force" government. It is also possible that he has in mind the formation of an authority which, without immediately supplanting either the GVN or the Communist Provisional Revolutionary Government, would establish the machinery for a settlement. He may believe that such an arrangement would be compatible both with President Nixon's proposal for an "electoral commission" and with the "Ten Point Peace Plan" surfaced by the Communists in May 1969.

6. Duong Van Minh. Big Minh is in a different category from Don, even though both men are moving along the same political track. Don is viewed by most Vietnamese as an out and out opportunist, whereas Minh is considered to be sincere. Though never really put to the test, Minh is believed to enjoy much more

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popular support in South Vietnam than Don, largely because of his role in the coup against Diem. Minh's support also is based in large part on his utility to opposition groups; most knowledgeable Vietnamese look upon him as an affable, somewhat inept, and manipulatable figure. In any event, most of the opposition groups cite Minh as a key figure in any future government. Even Don, who bows to no one in estimation of his own political clout, realizes that he needs Minh and probably sees himself as prime minister and real power under Minh.

7. Minh has not come forth with a clear position; characteristically, he has waffled over where he stands, what he has said, and what it means. Nonetheless, he has left the image of being somehow displeased with the Thieu Government without exactly saying so. His "positive" contributions to the debate thus far have been to suggest a national referendum to determine Thieu's support, and a national convention to work toward a "truly representative government." He also has stated that peace talks should be conducted only between the two Vietnamese sides. Minh's lack of specifics could be a shrewd tactic to avoid overcommitting himself; in effect, he may be using Don as a stalking horse. Given his past lack of decisiveness, however, it appears more likely that

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he simply cannot decide how far to move in challenging Thieu. In any event, he almost certainly harbors hopes that one day he again will be number one in South Vietnam.

8. The Bit Players. It is not clear how closely Minh and Don are combining their actions. They are in frequent contact, and Nguyen Xuan Oanh, NSF Secretary General, claims that they are in close collaboration in opposing Thieu. Oanh's claim may be an overstatement intended for US ears. In any event, both men have met with other opposition leaders, most of them of a leftist tinge. These have included Tran Ngoc Lieng; Tran Van Tuyen, a prominent lawyer; representatives of some of the sects; and Father Nguyen Ngoc Lan, a leftist Catholic figure. In addition, General Le Van Kim, the major planner of the 1963 coup that ousted Diem, has been in contact with Minh and Don, and some Vietnamese believe that if there is a guiding hand behind their actions, it is Kim's. Though sympathetic in viewpoint, Thich Tri Quang has thus far remained rather aloof. He considers Don tainted by opportunism; Tri Quang also may intend to make his own peace play in the future and may see no reason to move prematurely into anyone else's camp. Nguyen Van Bong's "National Progressive Movement," which casts itself as the "loyal opposition," does not appear to be involved.

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III. THE SETTING FOR THE FIRST SCENES

9. Of course it can be argued that Don and Minh are simply looking ahead to the 1971 presidential elections, and are laying the groundwork for challenging Thieu at a time when the US presence, and perhaps its support, will be reduced. Though this may be a factor, the two can hardly be sanguine about their chances in the electoral process as long as Thieu is in charge of the administration. Thieu could use the apparatus honestly or (if necessary) dishonestly to deliver the vote -- and he has raw military power available if needed. Moreover, there are no indications that the opposition to Thieu would be any less fragmented in 1971 than it was in 1967. Finally, it is open to question whether Minh and Don could defeat Thieu even in an honest contest between them.

10. At this stage then, neither Minh or Don appears to enjoy the support necessary to gain power. The two main pillars of the present government are the support of the military and the strong backing of the US. Although Don and Minh have maintained contacts and may enjoy some popularity within South Vietnam's military establishment, they do not have and are unlikely to get significant

support from this quarter under present circumstances. Thieu has strengthened his position within the military; the military also is aware that Thieu enjoys the support of Washington. Unless the US radically alters its stance toward Thieu, the bulk of the military is likely to continue their support of Thieu's government.

11. Thus it appears that the prospects for Minh and Don depend in large measure on Washington. Don certainly, and probably Minh as well, believes that at some point the US will opt for a political settlement with the Communists which will require a change in the GVN leadership. They both believe that by developing and demonstrating political strength in South Vietnam they will increase their chances of being accepted as the alternatives to Thieu and Ky. They also probably believe that the Communists would be responsive in these circumstances. Indeed, it is possible that they have already been approached along these lines by the Communists. Both men probably have contacts with them.

IV. THE LIKELY FINALE

12. It is beyond the scope of this memorandum to discuss possible changes in the US position toward the present GVN.

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Suffice it to say that in the normal course of events Minh and Don do not appear likely to become much more than a nuisance to the Thieu government in the near future, unless the US weakens in its support of the present Saigon regime or is believed in South Vietnam to be in the process of shifting. Don alone clearly lacks sufficient appeal to challenge the present leadership. Minh, however, might be able to muster considerable support if events seemed to be moving toward a restructured political arrangement. He is most respected in his native area of Cochinchina -- the South -- where Thieu (a Central Vietnamese) and Ky (a Northerner) are weakest. He might also be able to count on the support of the An Quang Buddhists. Though not the force they once were, the An Quang would give Minh support in Central Vietnam. Minh also might rally some support in this region through Don's National Salvation Front.

13. Minh, though not sympathetic to the Communists, has hinted that he thinks it possible to deal with them. For their part, the Communists have cited Minh as a "progressive" figure; they apparently view him with interest. This may in part be because they calculate that he is "soft" on communism, but it probably is even more a recognition that any challenge to the

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present GVN works in their favor. Their attitude toward Minh at a time of decision, however, would be conditioned in large part by how much the circumstances surrounding his rise to power had weakened South Vietnam. Their implication that Minh might be "acceptable" may only be propaganda, but it probably reflects a judgment on their part that any government which succeeded the Thieu regime would be weaker and more ineffective.

14. Even though Minh might be able to fashion a national grouping that gave the appearance of broad support it would, like other political coalitions in South Vietnam, be an amalgam of disparate and inharmonious groups, each committed to its own interests. A government based on this amalgam would be inherently weak, subject to divisiveness, and vulnerable to collapse. Given Minh's lack of administrative ability and drive, its future would be bleak indeed. Minh's status as a potential national leader, therefore, is less a tribute to his strength and appeal than a testimonial to the endemic poverty of politics in South Vietnam.

V. A SURPRISE ENDING?

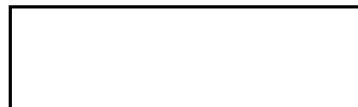
15. Should events begin to move in directions favorable to Big Minh or Senator Don, there is a chance that the military would

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act to reverse the trend. Many South Vietnamese and almost all of the key military leaders would interpret US sympathy toward Minh's ambitions as preparation for a political compromise in which the interests of non-Communist South Vietnamese would be seriously endangered. There is still very strong sentiment within the military against a political settlement with the Communists on any but the harshest terms; concepts of neutrality and accommodation find little favor among them. Some of them would certainly consider acting against Minh or Don, and US ability to dissuade them from such action might or might not be decisive, depending on circumstances. Finally, it is by no means certain that Minh would stay the course. If he came to believe that he was being "used" merely as a transitional figure in a game certain to end in Communist control in Saigon he might well leave the country. This is not to say that Minh and Don could never come to power in South Vietnam, but to emphasize that developments conducive to their accession could unleash strong counter-pressures as well.

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